



# NEWS RELEASE

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## USDA Provides Update on Seasonal High Tunnel Pilot

*YouTube Video Featuring Agriculture Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan  
and White House Assistant Chef Sam Kass Showcases White House Hoop Houses*

WASHINGTON, January 7, 2011 – Agriculture Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan today announced that more than 2,400 seasonal high tunnels are being constructed by farmers in 43 states through a pilot project initiated by USDA in fiscal year (FY) 2010. To view video of how NRCS-funded seasonal high tunnels are helping farmers extend the growing season, diversify production, conserve water, and reduce inputs, click [here](#).

“By capturing solar energy, seasonal high tunnels create favorable conditions enabling farmers to grow vegetables, berries and other specialty crops in climates and at times of the year in which it would otherwise be impossible,” Merrigan said. “Farmers who sell their high tunnel produce locally benefit from the extra income, and the community benefits from the availability of fresh, locally grown food.”

Seasonal high tunnels are structures made of plastic or metal pipe and covered with plastic or other sheeting. Easy to build, maintain and move, they provide an energy-efficient way to extend the growing season. Unlike greenhouses, they require no energy, relying on natural sunlight to modify the climate inside to create favorable conditions for growing vegetables and other specialty crops.

USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is providing financial assistance for seasonal high tunnels as part of a three-year trial to determine their effectiveness in conserving water, reducing pesticide use, maintaining vital soil nutrients, and increasing crop yields.

The pilot is offered under the *Know your Farmer, Know your Food* initiative, a USDA effort to connect farmers and consumers, strengthen local and regional food production, increase the use of sustainable agricultural practices, and promote consumption of fresh, local food. In FY 2010, NRCS provided \$13 million to landowners through its conservation programs to install high tunnels, and additional funding is available in FY 2011.

At the end of the pilot, NRCS will assess the conservation impact of seasonal high tunnels. In the meantime, they are generating high levels of interest around the country. The following examples illustrate how producers and consumers are benefiting from the installation of high tunnels.

- The Local Food Hub, a Virginia community-supported nonprofit that provides distribution, education and marketing services to small farmers, installed a high tunnel at its educational farm in September. The farm is already growing high-demand crops such as baby lettuces (arugula, mizuna, romaine and green, red and speckled oak leaf) that could not otherwise be grown during the fall season. The farm managers are also using the newly constructed high tunnel as a teaching tool to engage producers in conservation and organic production.
- A family beef operation in Utah installed a high tunnel in the summer of 2010 and added tomatoes, peppers, herbs, watermelons, and sweet corn to its farm production. When the family set up a roadside stand, neighbors began purchasing the local produce. Surrounding farmers plan to add their own seasonal high tunnels, and interest is growing in Utah’s buy local campaigns.

- A farmer in Alabama, who is committed to conservation and grows a broad assortment of crops using micro irrigation installed with USDA assistance, recently added a seasonal high tunnel to his operation. The high tunnel is enabling him to grow tomatoes well past the traditional growing season, and he expects it will also help reduce his energy use and improve both soil and water quality as a result of reduced pesticide and nutrient inputs.
- A new farmer in Montana installed a high tunnel in early June, and was able to grow tomatoes, lettuce, sweet corn, bean, peas, cantaloupe, cucumbers, cabbage, flowers, onions and radishes. The crops all germinated in less than a week and grew rapidly. Neighbors, impressed with the high tunnel, visited weekly to monitor the crops' progress.

For a breakdown of FY 2010 high tunnel funding by state, go to <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/success-stories/hightunnels/2010tunneldollars.html>. Additional states are expected to participate in the seasonal high tunnel pilot in FY 2011. In most cases, NRCS provides financial assistance equivalent to approximately half the cost of the high tunnel, but historically underserved producers may receive 75 to 90 percent financial assistance. For information on availability in a particular state and how to apply, visit your local USDA Service Center, found at <http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app?agency=nrcs>.

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